Critical Reception

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CRITICAL RECEPTION

Six months after Jonson's death, a volume of elegiac tributes by friends, followers and admirers appeared in print. Entitled *Jonsonus Virbius*, the collection was both a recognition of Jonson's eminence and an early attempt to establish the terms in which the Jonsonian inheritance would be assumed or assimilated. Thomas May, whose translation of Lucan's *Pharsalia* had been praised by Jonson, speaks of the 'feare' that those inheritors might experience when confronted by the need to write of, and after, this 'King of English Poetry'.[1] Another contributor, Sidney Godolphin, demonstrated nothing of this nervousness in offering a succinct and elegantly summative account of the departed poet:

> The *Muses* fairest *light* in no darke time,
> The *Wonder* of a *learned Age*; the *Line*
> Which none can passe; the most *proportion'd Witt*,
> To Nature, the *best Judge* of what was fit;
> The *deepest*, *plainest*, *highest*, *cleerest* PEN;
> The *Voice* most eccho'd by *consenting Men*,
> The *Soule* which answer'd best to all well said
> By others, and which most *requitall* made,
> Tun'd to the *highest Key* of *ancient* ROME,
> Returning all *her Musique* with *his owne*,
> In *whom* with *Nature*, *Studie* claim'd a part,
> And yet *who* to *himselfe* ow'd all his *Art*:
>
> Heere lies BEN: JOHNSON, every *Age* will looke
> With *sorrow* here, with *wonder* on *his* BOOKE.[2]

Godolphin's poem invokes the evaluative vocabulary through which Jonson had repeatedly urged that his work, and that of others, should be assessed. Learning and wit are constitutive qualities of poetry, and the good poet shows too the judgement to reach the right balance of such qualities in his work. His writing is profound, his style appropriately lofty yet also clear and plain, eschewing the kinds of obscurities that would limit its reach and appeal. A poet who writes like this takes his social responsibilities seriously, judiciously affirming and amplifying these same qualities when they can be detected in others. He also reflects and revives the virtues of classical Rome. Yet this kind of reverence for the classics does not make him a slavish imitator: instead, his assumption of a classical inheritance actually makes him free of such debilitating dependence on others, an inheritor in fact of a classical ideal of artistic power and freedom in which the great Roman authors, in particular, can be seen to have invested. This is what classical art teaches, and the more faithful a writer is to its model the greater his capacity for autonomous creation, for – a weighty term, this – *integrity*. It is Jonson who has brought such an ideal into the modern world, establishing a respectable and stable place for within the potentially corrupting modern world, defining and sustaining the forms of selfhood and collectivity that such a proper art requires.

Such exemplarity obviously makes of Jonson a master and a teacher of the poets charged with the important task of succeeding him, and many of his elegists dwell on this educative role. Yet Jonson has not only taught his followers how to write, or how to be a writer in not always commodious circumstances; more broadly and fundamentally, he has taught an age how to read. For some elegists this too is a matter of setting an example, as when Lucius Cary, another recipient of Jonson's praise, remarks on the range and scrupulosity of his reading:

His *Learning* such, no *Author* old nor new,
Escapt his reading that deserv'd his view,
And such his *Judgement*, so exact his *Test*,
Of what was best in *Bookes*, as what *bookes* best …[3]

Others, though, focus more on the ways in which Jonson's work requires a certain kind of response from them as readers or spectators. Henry King insists that English speakers can appreciate the strengths of their language 'by studying Johnson', while Jasper Mayne suggests that the audiences for Jonson's plays are 'made Judges' by the experience.[4] For Richard West, a comparison with his contemporaries serves to clarify what happens to Jonson's readers in their encounter with his works:

Shakespeare may make *griefe* merry, *Beaumonts* stile
Ravish and melt anger into a smile;
In winter *nights*, or after *meales* they be,
I must confesse very good companie:
But *thou* exact'st our best houres industrie;
Wee may read *them*; we ought to studie *thee*:
Thy *Scœnes* are *precepts*, every *verse* doth give
Counsell, and teach us not to *laugh*, but *live*.[5]

Thus Jonson demands to be read, West suggests, 'as Classick Authors', or as William Cartwright puts it:

Thy verse came season'd hence, and would not give;
Borne not to feed the Authour, but to *live*:

Whence mong the choycer Judges rise a strife,

To make *thee* read as Classick in *thy life*.[6]

For the contributors of *Jonsonus Virbius*, then, a crucial part of Jonson's achievement was that his writing required a mode of readerly care and attention that his contemporaries usually accorded only to classical literature. Recognising Jonson's classicism meant reading him as one would the classics, judiciously, studiously, as a vital part of the advancement of one's own learning.

Such a distanced, scholarly, rational mode of reading, a mode that prizes judiciousness, can accurately be described as critical. Jonson's early readers were undoubtedly aware of the extent to which his work licensed or demanded a reflective care in the form of criticism rather than more immediate, on the pulse or off the cuff, responses. This is something that Jonson had taught them, insisting throughout his work in a range of different ways on the essential role of a proper, critical reception in the healthy functioning of poetry. In his followers and commenders such care necessarily went hand in hand with praise: Jonson's work provided the evaluative terms through which it should itself be judged, and therefore could be seen as doubly exemplary. Where they acknowledge, again following Jonson, that his work had not always met with approbation, it is assumed or asserted that unfavourable responses were only failures or the absence of critical judgement rather than its proper exercise. As the years passed, though, the terms of criticism were themselves developed and transformed, and Jonson's example become sufficiently distant in time to make a different kind of distancing judgement much more likely. Keen, like his predecessor, to define the taste of an age, John Dryden re-evaluated Jonson's work a number of times, seeking to characterise and assess his place and significance according to poetic standards that were now not simply Jonson's own.

The comparison with his contemporaries also ceased, at least in one regard, to work to Jonson's credit. As Douglas Lanier shows elsewhere in this volume, Jonson's reputation became inextricably tied to that of Shakespeare; as the latter's inverse, though, his stature necessarily shrank as Shakespeare's grew throughout the eighteenth century. While Romanticism could then find in Shakespeare's work sufficient kinship to its own aesthetic principles, no such family resemblance was visible in Jonson. Even Jonson's insistence on scholarly care, and his sense of what constituted proper critical reading, came to count against him. His laborious, mechanical work appeared to set itself against nature and the creative forces of spirit and genius, and Jonsonian poetics now looked alien to readers grown accustomed to reading poetry under the rubric of a fully aestheticised, rather than rhetorical, conception of literary art. The seeming grotesques populating his plays could only painfully be compared to the characters that Shakespeare had summoned from his more profound imagination. Where the latter's characters 'possessed some of the mysteriousness of real people', affirming the nobility of the human, Jonson's 'were not individuals, but blueprints of types, or else, on the contrary, they were so frantically individual, so rampantly eccentric, that they ceased to seem human altogether.'[7] Besmirched by decades of prejudiced comment, Jonson's own character was also firmly assumed to have been as warped and unbalanced as that of one of those grotesques. Despite the exemplary efforts of William Gifford, his early nineteenth century editor, little of Jonson's work was commonly judged readable during the subsequent decades except the few lyric pieces and fragments included in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, and the fanciful confections of the masques. The rest of his writing could be characterised as coarse, or quaint, and the strange combination of qualities posited by such polarised judgements was a source of puzzlement. As D. H. Craig has put it, he appeared to be 'a writer who could not be resolved into a single identity: he was a leviathan, massive and unwieldy, yet he was also a poet of elegance and grace'.[8]

Although Jonson was notably praised by Algernon Swinburne in the late nineteenth century as supreme among 'the giants of energy and invention', his reputation was most significantly remade when modernism, and the growing influence of academic literary study, managed to effect a profound change in the terms of criticism once again.[9] In an important essay, T. S. Eliot proclaimed anew Jonson's readability – but only by insisting on a definition of reading that departed finally from Romantic assumptions. Claiming that no one since Dryden had managed to write 'a living criticism of Jonson's work', he attempted to rediscover that kind of critical response in acknowledging both Jonson's distinctive qualities and the reasons for his neglect. Jonson writes a 'poetry of the surface', but this does not mean that his work is superficial or immediately accessible to 'the lazy reader'. On the contrary:

> No swarms of inarticulate feelings are aroused. The immediate appeal of Jonson is to the mind; his emotional tone is not in the single verse, but in the design of the whole. But not many people are capable of discovering for themselves the beauty which is found only after labour.[10]

Jonson's poetry therefore 'requires study', which is itself defined as 'intelligent saturation in his work as a whole'. His writing rewards a proper, deliberate appreciation of its qualities, an appreciation that arises in the conscious and judicious experience of the total work.

Eliot's account of Jonson thus suggests that it is not the work but its readers that have had the problem. Jonson is readable, but only if approached correctly, and his writing will not render the kinds of satisfaction offered by others. From one standpoint, this is a pleasantly pluralist argument that a poetry of the surface has attractions merely different from, rather than inferior to, those of depth; but its pejorative references to

'lazy' readers, and the implicit high value it places on intelligence and study, is also a resurrection of a more Jonsonian account of artistic and aesthetic value. It both recalls and revives the kind of readerly posture demanded by Jonson himself and promulgated by his early admirers. Following Eliot, and chiming with the development in academic criticism of a serious, studious interest in the formal features of literature, the new reception of Jonson began to focus on the exemplary craft and artistry of his work. *Volpone*, for example, became a focus for sustained engagement with the intricacies and effects of Jonsonian plotting, and his other major plays were subject to similar attentions.[11] The Jonsonian masque was also subject to renewed consideration as a critically respectable, specifically *literary* form, and the properties and dynamics of his non-dramatic verse were set out in the kind of detail that only close and careful textual analysis could disclose to the reader.[12]

Yet when such critical formalism ceded place in the 1970s and 80s to more radical reimaginings of literary textuality, and therefore of what reading was held to consist in, and what criticism could now be, the critical encounter with Jonson's writings did not feature significantly in the debates. However, for Stanley Fish – to some extent a sympathiser of such reimaginings – Jonson's non-dramatic verse could indeed be read as engaging with the conditions of textual representation in a manner that could usefully be illuminated by the concerns of contemporary theory.[13] In Fish's account, Jonson's poems of praise are self-denying, if not self-consuming, artefacts: in their attempts to know their objects they seek to overcome the medium of representation through which, and only through which, they could know them. Such poems imagine an immediacy in which virtue does not need to be represented, in which it merely presents itself, and is recognised at once by those who apprehend it. This is an impossible vision of poetry as the embodiment of 'epistemological immediacy and ontological self-sufficiency', as Fish

puts it, the kind of secure and closed relations of a 'community of the same' in which an authorial self finds its work and its medium gloriously, if problematically, superfluous.[14]

Yet Fish's account of Jonson's awkward reflexivity concludes by explaining the poetry's peculiar features not through a theory of textuality or representation but in an account of its author's social location. Jonson was an 'outsider', forced to 'rely on others for favour and recognition'; his vision of 'an elect fellowship' for which he could be the speaking centre was a compensatory fantasy designed to deflect an awareness of social marginality.[15] For Fish, then, even the deconstructive tendencies in Jonson's writing were actually open to explanation in terms of its historical moment. He shared this sense of the interlocking axes of textual and historical accounting with Jonathan Goldberg, whose *James I and the Politics of Literature* of 1983 sought to disclose the relation of Jonson's writing to the representational strategies of his primary royal patron through a not dissimilar deployment of the concepts and terminology of poststructuralist theory. In making this move towards historical explanation Goldberg and Fish were rejoining a strong current of historicist or contextualist criticism that reached back at least as far as L. C. Knights.[16] This critical mode, seeking to locate texts in the explanatory context of their moment of first production and circulation, could also be traced to such sources as the scrupulous historical account of the Jonsonian masque offered by D. J. Gordon in important essays of the 1940s, but it became the dominant trend in the critical reception of Jonson from the later 1980s onwards.[17]

As the examples of Fish and Goldberg show, this development of a historicist horizon for Jonson criticism did not preclude a continuing engagement with the intellectual challenges and stimulants of literary theory. The historical imaginations and vocabulary of Marx, Bakhtin and Foucault have certainly influenced the ways in which Jonson's works have been read, and more recently the development in postcolonial theory of a critical sensitivity to issues of racial, national and cultural identity have left a

particular mark on the reading of the masques.[18] Perhaps the most fundamental impression, though, has been made by a feminist criticism alert both to early modern discourses of gender and sexuality and to more recent critical assumptions that stand in need of correction. While some critics have suggested that plays such as *Epicene* are marked by a pervasive misogyny, others have argued instead that Jonson's drama offers a more complex engagement with the ways in which gender and sexual identities are configured.[19] Attention paid to the plays' performance on the all-male stages of early modern commercial theatre, to the participation of women in the masques performed at court, and to the importance for Jonson of female patrons, has also helped to fill out and diversify the picture of gendered discourses and relations in and around Jonson's writing.[20]

Other forms of historicist criticism have not been informed to quite the same degree by contemporary political-theoretical concerns. Instead, they have sought to illuminate Jonson's work through a more fundamental reliance on the methods and resources of mainstream empirical history and bibliographical scholarship. In particular, there has been an invigorating reliance on the hitherto under-acknowledged evidence of the archive, and on the fruits of historians' archival research, which has both developed and challenged the claims of a precedent literary history.[21] This form of enquiry has transformed critical views of the masques in particular, even to the extent of recovering lost texts.[22] While earlier generations saw them as fanciful *jeux-d'esprit*, and critics such as Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg emphasised the extent to which they could be seen as part of the representational strategies of an absolutist monarchy, subsequent work has brought a more heavily populated arena of historical actors into view.[23] The masques have consequently been seen as involved in a more intimate fashion with the day-to-day political jostlings of the Stuart court and country, and therefore as more thoroughly webbed into, and explained with reference to, the detailed narratives of

political history.[24] Our views of the rest of Jonson's work have also been transformed by the dominance of this same critical orientation, especially because it has reinvigorated a more rhetorical view of his art. Detailed contextualisation of this nature demands an account of his writing which presumes its instrumentality and focuses on its purposes in the moments of its production and circulation; a criticism operating from such a standpoint also finds that its own conceptions of the nature and function of writing can resonate with some of Jonson's reflections on the ideals and perils of authorship.[25]

This historicist effort is clearly a different form of reading from the 'intelligent saturation' or the 'living criticism' of which Eliot wrote: it presumes a different understanding both of criticism and of its objects. It could be argued that it is more clearly descended from the attitudes of the unnamed 'industrious readers' he describes condescendingly as 'those whose interest was historical and curious, and who thought that in discovering the historical and curious interest' of Jonson's work 'they had discovered the artistic value as well'.[26] In truth, contemporary criticism is much more sceptical than Eliot was of any singular notion of 'artistic value', and is often animated by the conviction that the artistic and historical are to be drawn into a critically productive relation as well as distinguished from each other. Its habituation within the academy, too, ensures that its exigencies are not quite those of Eliot's time and milieu. But the porosity of its boundaries and the roving eyes of its inhabitants are among the chief characteristics, perhaps the strengths, of the literary academy, and there is another important aspect to the current critical reception of Jonson within existing institutional frameworks that attempts to do justice to the contemporary experience of his plays in the theatre rather than, or in addition to, the cornucopian absorptions of the archive or library and the historical imagination that they feed. The most obviously 'living' criticism of Jonson today is perhaps that which witnesses to the power and effects of his plays in performance.

In a very influential book Jonas Barish argued that Jonson was torn between a skilled delight in the resources and powers of theatricality and a moralistic suspicion of its painted pageantry.[27] The antagonism of which Barish wrote was in some ways reflected in the literary critical tendency to downplay the plays' status as performance texts, a tendency shared by New Critical close readers and historically minded scholars alike, and assisted by the sometimes only fitful presence of Jonson's plays in the modern repertory. Anne Barton's 1984 book *Ben Jonson: Dramatist* forcefully reasserted the centrality of theatre to critical accounts of his work, and a striking feature of Peter Womack's *Ben Jonson* was its capacity to place the plays in the speculative space and time of imagined performance.[28] Since then, critics including Richard Cave and Brian Woolland have led efforts to develop an account of Jonsonian theatricality that grows not only from the history of its staging conditions but also out of the insights derived from rehearsing, performing and watching his plays today.[29] Historicist critics can now find themselves in fruitful dialogue with champions such as the playwright Peter Barnes, who suggests that 'it is helpful when writing about Jonson if you have worked in some capacity on an actual Jonson production, in a theatre, in front of an audience'.[30] Shakespeare, of course, has long had such theatrical champions, and his ubiquitous presence on the stages of the world has meant that criticism has never been able to forget his theatricality, even when it would have liked to do so. Jonson has not been so lucky, and for critics like Barnes this makes the issue particularly pressing. It is not just that the plays in performance allow us to witness another aspect of Jonson's achievement; in fact, the plays can *only* properly be understood and appreciated in performance. As Barnes puts it, in a suitably vivid simile, 'on stage his seemingly heavy, clotted verse and prose unfolds like beautiful Japanese paper flowers in water'.[31] Without the phenomenality of performance we are unable to see something absolutely essential to his work. However discerning our readerly attentions, however scrupulous our historical scholarship, we will still fail to recognise

the Jonsonian word in its true guise, as a germinal potentiality always ready to be actualised as theatre.

Such an urgent insistence on the critical importance of performance is a challenge to other schools of criticism, just as they in turn offer challenges to the necessary limitations of their fellows and rivals. We should perhaps not look to resolve the salutary tensions between them into the triumph of one perspective or another, just as we should not assume that the productivity of any individual stance is completely exhausted, however untimely it can come to seem. Though Jonson would not recognise it as such, this tension within and between forms of criticism is also a kind of readerly fidelity: it testifies to the ongoing, undiminished demand for proper attention that he addressed to all those who found themselves in the presence of his words. It is a sometimes attenuated, involuted but unignorable part of the inheritance that Jonson bequeathed to us, his audience, readers, and followers.

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[1] Thomas May, 'An Elegie Upon Benjamin Johnson', in Brian Duppa, ed., *Jonsonus Virbius* (London, 1638), 21.

[2] Sidney Godolphin, 'The Muses fairest light…', *Jonsonus Virbius*, 27.

[3] Lucius Cary, Viscount Falkland, 'An Eglogue on the Death of Ben Johnson', *Jonsonus Virbius*, 4.

[4] Henry King, 'Upon Ben. Johnson', and Jasper Mayne 'To the Memory of Ben. Johnson', *Jonsonus Virbius*, 17, 32.

[5] Richard West, 'On Mr. Ben. Johnson', *Jonsonus Virbius*, 56.

[6] West, 'Ben. Johnson', 57; William Cartwright, 'In the Memory of the most Worthy Benjamin Johnson', *Jonsonus Virbius*, 37.

[7] Jonas Barish, ed., *Ben Jonson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963), 7.

[8] D. H. Craig, ed., *Ben Jonson: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1989), 34-5.

[9] Algernon Swinburne, *A Study of Ben Jonson* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1889), 3.

[10] T. S. Eliot, 'Ben Jonson', in Barish, ed., *Ben Jonson*, 14-15.

[11] See, for example, Barish, 'The Double Plot in *Volpone*', in Barish, ed., *Ben Jonson*, 93-105, and Stephen Greenblatt, 'The False Ending in Volpone', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 75 (1976), 90-104.

[12] Dolora Cunningham, 'The Jonsonian Masque as a Literary Form', in Barish, ed., *Ben Jonson*, 160-174; Wesley Trimpi, *Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study of the Plain Style* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962).

[13] Stanley Fish, 'Authors-Readers: Jonson's Community of the Same', *Representations* 7 (1984), 26-58.

[14] Fish, 'Authors-Readers', 35.

[15] Fish, 'Authors-Readers', 57.

[16] L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1937).

[17] See D. J. Gordon, *The Renaissance Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

[18] See, for example, Don Wayne, *Penshurst: The Semiotics of Place and the Poetics of History* (London: Methuen, 1984), Peter Womack, *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), Richard Burt, *Licensed by Authority: Ben Jonson and the Discourses of Censorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), Yumna Siddiqi, 'Dark Incontinents: The Discourses of Race and Gender in Three Renaissance Masques', *Renaissance Drama* 23 (1992), 139-64, James Smith, 'Effaced History: Facing the Colonial

Contexts of Ben Jonson's *Irish Masque at Court*', *English Literary History* 65 (1998), 297-321, Rebecca Bach, 'Ben Jonson's "Civil Savages"', *Studies in English Literature* 37 (1997), 277-93.

[19] See, for example, Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), Helen Ostovich 'Mistress and Maid: Women's Friendship in *The New Inn*', The Ben Jonson Journal 4 (1997), 1-26, and 'Hell for Lovers: Shades of Adultery in *The Devil is an Ass*', in Julie Sanders, Kate Chedgzoy and Susan Wiseman, eds, *Refashioning Ben Jonson: Gender, Politics and the Jonsonian Canon* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 155-82.

[20] See, for example, Laura Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization 1579-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Sanders, Chedgzoy and Wiseman, eds, *Refashioning Ben Jonson*, Clare McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage: Anna of Denmark and Female Masquing in the Stuart Court (1590-1619)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

[21] Mark Bland, 'Ben Jonson and the Legacies of the Past', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 67 (2004), 371-400.

[22] James Knowles, 'Jonson's *Entertainment at Britain's Burse*', in Martin Butler, ed., *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson: Text, History and Performance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 114-51.

[23] Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature*; Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theatre in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

[24] David Bevington and Peter Holbrook, eds, *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[25] Richard Helgerson, Self-*Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Richard Dutton, *Ben Jonson: Authority: Criticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); Robert Evans, *Ben Jonson and the Poetics of*

Patronage (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989); Joseph Loewenstein, *Ben Jonson and Possessive Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[26] Eliot, 'Ben Jonson', 15.

[27] Jonas Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

[28] Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson: Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[29] Richard Cave, *Ben Jonson* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); Richard Cave, Elizabeth Schafer and Brian Woolland, eds, *Ben Jonson and Theatre: Performance, Practice and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1999); Brian Woolland, ed., *Jonsonians: Living Traditions* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Sean McEvoy, *Ben Jonson: Renaissance Dramatist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

[30] Peter Barnes, 'Bartholomew Fair: All the Fun of the Fair', in Woolland, ed., *Jonsonians*, 47.

[31] Barnes, 'Bartholomew Fair', 46.